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ABSTRACT

The Japanese success story has made W. Edwards Deming's Total Quality Management (TQM) theory increasingly popular among American managers, from car manufacturers to educational leaders. TQM is based on two tenets: the primacy of customer satisfaction and the necessity of tapping nontraditional sources (especially employee ideas) to institute quality. TQM creates a quality-promoting environment by advocating workplace changes based on Deming's 14 points, condensed into 4 categories: positive customer relationships, employee empowerment, continual gathering and use of statistical data, and creation of an environment promoting unity and change. Adapting TQM to educational settings means changing teacher and student roles and student evaluation philosophies. At a Sitka, Alaska high school, students track their own progress, influence their own education, and operate their own salmon smoking business. The school downplays grades and standardized tests in favor of continuous evaluation. TQM will fade out unless the principles of gradual transformation and continuous improvement are understood and applied. Businesses are still stressing short-term profits and individual performance over teamwork and customer satisfaction. Although TQM offers no panacea for an ailing educational system, it sheds new light on educational management. (MLH)

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Total Quality Management

by Tyler Weaver

In the years following World War II, W. Edwards Deming, an American statistician with a new management theory, took his ideas to Japan. The Japanese, devastated by the effects of the war, were looking to restructure their economy, and Deming's principles became the blueprint they needed. Now, more than four decades later, Japanese products are in demand worldwide.

The Japanese success story has made Deming's management theory, which some call Total Quality Management (TQM), a phenomenon that is getting renewed attention in America. With its focus on customer satisfaction, employee empowerment, and product quality, it has stirred interest among American managers, from car manufacturers to hospital administrators, and most recently, educators. This Digest looks at the tenets of TQM and their application to schools.

What Is the Philosophy of TQM?

Although no two businesses use TQM in exactly the same way, its theory rests on two basic tenets. The first and most important is that customers are vital to the operation of the organization. Without customers, there is no business, and without business, there is no organization. Consequently, it should be the primary aim of any group to keep customers satisfied by providing them with quality products (Deming 1986).

These ideas are not foreign to most organizations; what makes TQM unique is its call for a restructuring of management methods to create that quality. TQM proponents urge organizations to turn nearsighted, top-down management "on its head" by involving both customers and employees in decisions. This second tenet, that management needs to listen to nontraditional sources of information in order to institute quality, is based on the belief that people want to do quality work and that they would do it if managers would listen to them and create a workplace based on their ideas (Deming).

Managers, in the TQM view, need to become leaders who "not only work in the system but also on the system" (Rocheleau 1991). A company will see continuous improvement in products only when managers realize all systems consist of interdependent parts and work to aim all those parts toward a vision of quality, proponents argue. This type of leadership is needed to ensure that product quality improves "constantly and forever" and truly satisfies the customers (Deming).

How Does TQM Create an Environment that Promotes Quality?

TQM is more than just a philosophy. In addition to proposing new theories about the workplace, it advocates specific changes that managers need to make if they want to improve the system. These changes are best described in Deming's "14 Points," which are condensed under the four categories below:

• *Customer Relationships*: Customers can be either internal or external to an organization. Just as a customer is the person buying a product in a store, an employee is the customer of management. Managers need to realize that quality work will not be done unless they provide employees with quality products to work with (Blankstein 1992).

• *Employee Empowerment*: TQM starts at the top but should permeate the workplace; it fact, it will fail without employee involvement. Since workers know more about their jobs than management does, their input is vital to improving the system. It is a manager's responsibility to continually train employees in the methods of TQM, involve them in management decisions, listen to their suggestions for system changes, and work to implement those changes (Schmoker 1992).

• *Continual Gathering and Use of Statistical Data*: Most companies monitor the quality of their products by doing mass inspections that determine how many low-quality items are being produced, but Deming calls for monitoring of the production process by continually gathering statistical data so that problems can be identified as they are happening instead of when it is too late to solve them. When problems are identified, they should be the focus of discussion, and the groups discussing them should rely on the data to institute change instead of randomly assigning blame to individuals or departments (Deming).

• *Create an Environment that Promotes Unity and Change*: People need to feel comfortable discussing problems and suggesting solutions. Managers need to work at breaking down barriers between departments so that interactive discussion can take place. Fear must be eliminated. Also, managers are urged to do away with slogans, quotas, goals, and objectives since they encourage competition between workers and put the focus on individual results rather than process (Deming).

How Does TQM Translate to Education?

Considerable effort has gone into translating ideas generated by TQM to education, and adaptations of Deming's fourteen points pepper recent educational journals. Most of the points, such as the dissolving of barriers

EA 024 116

between departments, are essentially the same in education as they are in the business world. Some TQM advocates, however, call for changes in education that may seem radical to educators.

• *The Role of Students*: TQM recognizes students as both customers and employees of the educational system. Administrators need to involve students in their own education by training them to question the learning process, and once the students have questioned it, administrators need to seriously consider student proposals for change (Olson 1992b).

• *The Role of Teachers*: TQM calls for changes in teachers' relationships with both students and administrators; teachers need to view education through students' eyes, and they need to work with administrators as a team. This teamwork is largely the responsibility of administrators, who need to delegate some of their responsibility and power to teachers (Rhodes 1992).

• *Testing and Evaluation*: Instead of using standardized tests and grades to measure students' progress, schools that embrace TQM often try to assess student progress regularly throughout the school year. By doing so, they avoid bringing problems to students' attention at the end of the year, when it is too late to do anything about them. The same sort of process is used to evaluate teachers and administrators as well; instead of basing teacher evaluation on one classroom visit, teachers are evaluated throughout the year (Blankstein).

Where Is TQM Used in Education?

If there is a comprehensive, well-documented, and relatively longstanding educational TQM program, it is the program at Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Sitka, Alaska, where it has been a way of life since 1988. Mt. Edgecumbe has involved students to the same degree that it involves teachers. Students at the school track their own progress, have input into the education they receive (in one instance, the class schedule was altered in response to students' evaluations of how teachers spent class time), and operate their own salmon smoking business, which brings in thousands of dollars each year from east Asian countries (Rocheleau).

Mt. Edgecumbe also downplays grades and standardized tests in favor of continuous evaluation, which makes comparisons to other schools difficult. The percentage of Mt. Edgecumbe students who enter and stay in college is approximately twenty times the norm for Alaskan students with similar backgrounds (Olson 1992b).

Other schools have been slower to adopt programs that are as comprehensive as Mt. Edgecumbe's. Educational TQM is so new that most efforts to institute it are still in their infancy. In the words of Olson (1992b), "while TQM has generated a lot of talk in schools, it has produced less action." If schools do use TQM, they usually implement it in areas that most closely resemble TQM in business, such as contracting out custodial services and processing purchase orders. Another common practice is to use TQM methods to solve a specific problem, such as student absenteeism, instead of attempting to apply TQM principles to the school or district as a whole.

Is TQM a Fad?

The novelty of TQM and the fact that there are so few comprehensive TQM systems in education have caused many people to label quality as a fad. They argue that TQM, like so many management theories before it that educators tried to borrow from the business world, is destined to fade into obscurity.

Indeed, there is some indication that even in the business world quality is given lipservice more often than it is applied. A 1992 study for the American Quality Association revealed widespread interest in quality. But the study also turned up many companies that have instituted TQM practices without understanding that it requires a gradual transformation. This steady improvement happens only when an organization's managers have long-term vision and dedication to systematic change. The primary emphasis in most businesses is still on short-term profits and individual performance rather than teamwork and customer satisfaction (Fuchsberg 1992).

The current state of TQM is perhaps best summed up by Schmoker: Some "has been written about [it]; little of it has been absorbed, believed, and implemented in American schools or businesses." This might be explained by the fact that systematic change requires time, but it might also be an indication the quality movement is not achieving its vision.

It is doubtful that interest in TQM will simply fade away, especially since TQM in education has received support from both business and government. Several districts have received training from such successful TQM businesses as Toyota of America (Schmoker), and at least twenty states are considering awards for quality, several of which will be open to educators. In addition, national award programs for quality business management, such as the Baldrige Award, are considering opening their application processes to educators (Olson 1992).

With this type of interest and support, the educational quality movement will likely generate continuing interest. TQM may not hold all the answers for an ailing educational system, but it does shed some new light on educational management.

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